

GENERAL JOHN J. PERSHING

Representative of Kansas City Star Spent a Day at His Old Home Here to Get Story of His Boyhood Days.

From Kansas City Sunday Star

In Linn County, Missouri, where he was born, John Joseph Pershing is revered clear up to the limit. He is the apple of the eye of the countryside. Residents of Laclede, Pershing's home town, tingle and glow at the mention of his name—yea, they inflate. Those who knew him as a boy bask in the reflection of his distinction. To have known Pershing—to have gone to school with him—is enough.

Life, forever after, is colored with romance, adventure, fame. No one from Laclede or the whole of Linn County, so far as is now recalled, ever did anything spectacular, excepting John Pershing. But he did enough. There is more good healthy pride concentrated in Linn County than in any other given area of similar size on the earth's surface. The kaiser stands no higher in Wilhelmstasse.

There is a big brown house on Main Street that used to be white house more than a half century ago. There is a faction that insists it was the birthplace of the famous general. Another faction is equally certain that he was born several miles out in the country in a section house, his father being a section foreman at the time, which was fifty-six years ago. Both factions agree, however, that Pershing grew up in the house from a toddler until he got his appointment to West Point.

The earliest recollections held on the Pershing object are possessed by "Aunt Susan" Hewitt, a cheery widow of 75 who lives alone in the neatest of little cottages with old-time hollyhocks in the garden.

Sitting in her little parlor with its immaculate rag carpet and antique furniture, "Aunt Susan" can entertain by the hour with stories of the war and of Robert E. Lee and General Sheridan, both of whom she knew personally. She is a sturdy Republican and Lincoln's portrait hangs on the wall. Never yet, she says, has she seen a Democrat who could be trusted. But her specialty is John Pershing.

"Law, yes, I remember John when he wasn't more than two or three year old," she tells. "I can see him now playing out in the road in the dust with his little dress bobbing up and down. We used to run the hotel when my husband, Captain Hewitt, was alive—and when John was big enough to put on trousers he used to eat more pie in our kitchen than any other boy in town. Presently, before we knew it, he grew up to be tall, straight young man. He was smart, but he was very quiet and he had a lot of character. You could simply look at him and tell he was an exception.

"He was back here ten years ago. It was the on the 24th day of October that Uncle Henry Lomax came up to my door and said 'Aunt Susan, there's a gentleman outside that wants to see you.' When I stepped out and saw a tall man Uncle Henry asked me if I knew who it was.

"Yes," I says, 'I can see his mother's features in his face. It's John Pershing.' He was a brigadier general then. He came to me with his arms open and he embraced me and kissed me and we both cried.

"Aunt Susan," he says—and I'll never forget his words as long as I live—"Aunt Susan, it does my

very heart good to meet my mother's dear old friends. This place seems like home to me and it always will. I've been away a long time and there have been many changes but this is home."

"The chrysanthemums were in bloom, and after we had talked a while in the parlor I went out and picked a bouquet for him to take away.

"They are going to have some kind of a reception for me tonight, and I want you to come, Aunt Susan," he says. I told him I'd try to be there, but that I was tired and worn out because I'd been working in the garden.

"You won't have to walk, Aunt Susan," he says. 'I'll come after you myself.' About 5 in the afternoon he came in a buggy and I called out: 'Hurrah for you, Johnny Pershing! You like me better than all the rest, don't you?'

"I sure do, Aunt Susan," he called back. We went to the reception together, and my! what a crowd.

"The whole house was packed and people were standing in the yard. Johnny shook hands with everybody and talked to them, and he finally made a speech, which I didn't hear because there were so many people around. John Pershing always did have talent."

She was old and tired and tears dampened her cheeks as she talked.

W. H. Blakey was a pupil under Pershing when the now famous soldier was a country school teacher at Prairie Mound thirty-eight years ago. Pershing taught two terms of school in the country, eight miles south of Laclede.

"John Pershing ate many a meal in our house when he was teaching school," Mr. Blakey relates. "I remember one day at the noon hour a big farmer with red sideburns came riding up to the school house on a horse with a revolver in his hand. Pershing had whipped one of the farmer's children and the father was going to get the school teacher.

"I remember how he rode up cursing before all the children in the school yard and another boy and I ran down in a gully because we were afraid. We peeked over the edge though, and heard Pershing tell the farmer to put up his gun, get down off the horse and fight like a man.

"The farmer got down and John stripped off his coat. He was only a boy of 17 or 18 and slender, but he whipped the big farmer almost to death. And I've always hated red sideburns ever since."

H. C. Lomax, banker, also "knew him when," but Mr. Lomax is a few years older and was a young man when Pershing was a boy. Nevertheless, he recalls in a general way the sort of chap Pershing was.

"He was a scholarly boy, with a wealth of natural gentility," said the banker. "He wasn't foolish or wild like many boys. He had a great deal of self-respect, but he was not snobbish in any way and was probably the most popular youngster in town. The characteristic I remember best was his self-possession and air of competency. I used to clerk in his father's general merchandise store after the elder Pershing had given up railroad work. John never stayed around the store much and he didn't seem to care much about business. His whole time, it seems,

was taken up with his studies."

Pershing's seatmate in school, C. C. Bigger, a lawyer, says John—they all call him John—had almost white hair until he was nearly grown, and that he was nicknamed "tow head."

"His complexion was almost as fair as a girl's," Mr. Bigger contributes. "I've had many a fight with him and I always could whip him because I was bigger, but he was always ready to keep right on fighting. Whip him one day and he would be right back to tackle you the next. They were mere kid fights and meant nothing whatever. John was not the sort that liked to fight especially, but when our ideas conflicted and we saw no other way out he was always right there. He was the gamest boy I ever knew. He always was at the head of the class, but he wasn't the typical student. At baseball or any other sport he was one of the boys. He was fair and just and character just naturally stood out on him. Whatever he did he did with all his might.

"When he took his examination for West Point with others who were trying for the appointment to be given by Congressman Burrough my brother was on the examining board. The United States came near losing a great soldier right there because John was only one point ahead of the next man, a fellow named Higginbotham. The wrong answer to one question would have sent the other man to West Point and Pershing would have been a lawyer, because he always inclined that way."

O. F. Libby, another lawyer, says Pershing was one of the few men from the district to get an honest appointment to West Point. Before Burrough was elected, Mr. Libby says, the same congressmen used to sell the appointments at \$500 apiece. Burrough had been a Baptist preacher, and when he went in he announced that the appointment would go to the winner of a competitive examination.

"Before John went to Trenton to take the examination he told me that he felt he had a pretty good chance to win if the examinations were on the square," Mr. Libby said. "But he said he couldn't hope to get it if there was any grafting like there had been in the past. It happened that the examination was on the square, and that's the reason that Pershing got in. I used to want to go myself, but our congressman wanted \$500 to sent me, so I waited, and the next one wanted \$250. While I was waiting for an honest man to get in I got to be over the age limit."

But everybody in the county admits that of all Pershing's boyhood friends, Charles Spurgeon, who is in the clothing business at Brookfield, was his most intimate associate.

"We knew each other as only two boys can who are always together," Mr. Spurgeon said meditatively, as he leaned back in a leather chair in the lobby of the hotel in Brookfield. "We were in school together at Laclede and in the normal at Kirksville. What a head for mathematics he had! Many a night when I would close my books at 10 o'clock he would stay up until midnight wrestling with a problem. If he struck a hard one he wouldn't stop till he had solved it and he wouldn't accept any help. He would finish the job alone. Nothing seem to upset him. He was always level-headed and clean minded but he was hard. There was something about him that went true to the mark. You could tell that he was headed somewhere, even then, I know what to expect of him in

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